ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
45 South Street
Bishops Stortford
Herts CM23 3AG
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck
New Jersey 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1975

Series: Each title is given a seven-figure serial number placed in the top right hand corner of the microfiche title strip. This is an accession number. The first figure indicates the number of the list in which the title first appears: the first three-figure group signifies the gallery or museum; the second three-figure group the accession number for that title.

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Location of original: The National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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94. D. 328. 24
Grolier Club, N.Y.A. Carteret Book

# AN EXHIBITION OF
# WOOD ENGRAVINGS
## BY RUDOLPH RUZICKA
### WITH ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF PAST TIMES

THE CARTERET BOOK CLUB
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# TECHNIQUE OF WOOD ENGRAVING: A BRIEF SURVEY: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE WORK OF RUDOLPH RUZICKA

BY W. M. I., JR.

THE woodcut is not only the oldest of the graphic arts, the earliest undisputed date to appear on one being 1428, but also, if the history of culture be considered, the most important, as, until the invention of photographic processes, it was the most economical and frequently used form of book illustration.

If a piece of paper is pressed upon a flat square piece of wood which has previously been covered with printing ink, it will, when pulled away, have impressed upon it a solid black square just the size of the wood. If the surface of the wood is cut away in a pattern, this pattern will show in white on the blackened paper. Whether the paper bears upon it white lines and spaces on a black ground, or black lines and spaces upon a white ground depends, therefore, entirely upon how much of the surface of the wood has been removed before it is printed. The surface of a block of wood may be cut away either with knives and gouges, or with engraving tools, called gravers, similar in general design to those used by jewelers and other metal workers. Gravers are simply very small gouges which have not been hollowed out, and which therefore can only be used on blocks of wood the printing surface of which runs

at right angle to the grain. That the graver could thus be used on wood was first discovered by some Englishmen in the XVIII Century. By this method a V-shaped furrow can be cut in the surface of a block with one motion of the tool as compared with the two strokes necessary to cut a similar line with a knife. Moreover the furrow so cut can easily be made much narrower than any that can be cut with a knife, so tenuous in fact that the recent American school produced woodcuts in which positive line disappeared, its place being taken by grey tints composed of thousands of microscopic white lines. The ease and simplicity of graver work have practically driven the knife out of existence as a means of making woodcuts, although for the untrained person the knife is more readily to be used. The difficulty of making minute furrows with a knife is so great that generally speaking knife woodcuts are composed of bold black lines on white grounds, while the typical graver cut is composed of white lines on a black ground. The artist engraver wields the graver with perfect freedom, and such men as Lepère in France and Ruzicka in this country, often use white and black lines and tints on the same block.

In addition to black line and white line work there are two important variations, each of which is based upon the possibility of printing two or more blocks in different inks one after the other on the same piece of paper. One of these is known as chiaroscuro, in which the effect produced is somewhat similar to that of a pen drawing which has had thin washes of the same or some quite similar colored ink run over it with a brush. The other is color printing, in which the several blocks are printed in quite positive colors: bright reds, blues and greens, for instance, appearing upon the same print. In both of these methods the various blocks, one for each color, are cut or engraved in the same way that an ordinary woodblock is.

Until the middle of the XVIII Century it appears never to have been customary for the artist to cut his own designs, the cutting, like the printing, being done by artisans. The time consumed in cutting out with a knife, minute white spaces between lines and the difficulty of doing this without hacking into the lines or breaking them away entirely, were so great that the artists of the XV Century and the early years of the XVI Century developed a very beautiful system of open line drawing with

remarkably little cross hatching. The pressure of the printing press was so great that it was apt either to break down isolated lines or to drive them so deep into the paper that the general effect of the picture was marred. The early woodcut designers therefore covered the surfaces of their blocks with open lines which actually and physically supported each other, the truss-like linear system so evolved remaining one of the particular distinguishing features of the woodcut until the introduction of the modern printing press. The one other important distinction between the early woodcuts and the later ones is that in a really fine impression of an old woodcut the lines, no matter how thin or how wide, are all of the same blackness, while in the late XVIII Century and XIX Century work they are not. The only method the older men had of lightening the pressure of the press upon individual lines and thus making them less black was to shave their tops off so that they were lower than the other lines. This method was clumsy and its results could not be counted on, so that it was little used prior to the XVIII Century, when Papillon, the last great knife cutter, and Bewick, the first important engraver on wood, carried it to its highest

though erratic perfection. Papillon, and probably other Frenchmen before him, began to achieve the same results by pasting little pieces of paper on that part of the printing press which was next to the paper when being printed, a thoroughly dependable and much easier method, which differed from the other only in that instead of putting less pressure upon the light lines, it put more pressure upon the heavy lines. This latter method is still in use; without it the delicate tint blocks of the American school of wood-engravers above referred to could not have been produced and a woodcut could not be adequately printed in the modern printing press, which works without a blanket between the paper and the part of the press which presses it down upon the block.

The woodcut has at all times been used as a method of expression by competent artists, some of the very earliest cuts, although technically crude so far as cutting and printing are concerned, being among the most impressive and beautiful that have ever been produced. They are usually found printed by hand in gaudy colors, a practice which remained customary until the beginning of the XVI Century, in many books of the XV Century, apparently hav-

ing been sold by the publisher plain or colored as desired. The primitives are of great rarity, but, thanks to modern methods of reproduction they can be studied in facsimile. Until the very end of the XV Century it is impossible to attribute any group of woodcuts to any particular artist, although each city and country had its highly developed local characteristics.

The earliest woodcut designer concerning whom we have any information is Erhart Rewich who designed the cuts for Breydenbach's account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, printed at Mainz in 1486, the earliest woodcuts in which there is any marked development of cross hatching. Michel Wolgemut is the next distinct personality to appear. He made the designs for the illustrations to the Schatzbehalter printed at Nüremberg in 1491, and, with Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, for the Nüremberg Chronicle printed at the same place in 1498.

The earliest book printed from movable type to contain any pictorial woodcuts was Ulrich Boner's Edelstein, printed by Albrecht Pfister, at Bamberg about 1461. For many years the so-called block books, both illustrations and text of which were cut upon wooden planks, were supposed to have been produced prior to the introduction of

movable types, but it has almost conclusively been shown that these curious books were made after and not before the first books were printed from type.

Apparently the earliest case of color printing occurs in Sacrabosco's Sphaera Mundi, printed by Ratdolt at Venice in 1485, in which the lines of some astronomical diagrams are printed in several colors. The Brixen Missal of 1498, printed by Ratdolt at Augsburg, contains the first color printing in the full sense of the word, for here in addition to the black outline block four different color blocks have been used on the same print. These colors are quite flat, simply filling in spaces between the black lines, and there is no superposition of colors. The earliest chiaroscuro, Cranach's St. George of 1507, is an imitation of a pen drawing on colored paper heightened with white, a favorite method of the Renaissance artists, in which a black outline block was printed on a piece of paper which had previously been colored blue, the high lights being subsequently added by printing them in gold from a second block. In 1508, Jost de Negker, at Augsburg, cut the blocks for an equestrian portrait of the Emperor Maximilian designed by Burgkmair, in which the high lights were produced by

cutting lines in the surface of a color block which, when printed on a piece of white paper, allowed the latter to show through. The black outline block was printed after the color block. The method thus evolved was used to powerful effect not only by Burgkmair and Cranach, but also by Hans Baldung Grün and his contemporary, Johann Waechtlin of Strassburg. In some of Burgkmair's and Waechtlin's prints the black outline block is completely dispensed with, several tints being printed, in some cases one over the other, from separate blocks.

Ugo da Carpi, the first and possibly the best of the Italian makers of chiaroscuros, obtained a patent in Venice in 1516, for his process, which was the same as that used by the great Germans. He reproduced in this manner many drawings by Raphael, Titian, and Parmigiano. His work differs from that of the Germans in that it consists rather of broad masses of color usually much in the same low key, than in line work superposed on positive color.

Looking back over the history of the woodcut it may be roughly divided into three great types aside from the primitive, in which men were roughly forcing the block to their uses; the calligraphic,

exemplified by the work of Dürer and Holbein in which the attempt has always been to make a facsimile of a pen drawing; the typographic, exemplified by the Venetian practice, in which the beauty of the printed page and a close dependence of the woodcut upon the type face has been aimed for; and what may be called the technical, based on the materials and tools with which it is made, exemplified by the Florentine and Parisian schools and the modern painter-engraving of such men as Bewick and Lepère. Chiaroscuro and color prints, being only a duplication of blocks, may occur in any of the three principal types. Photographic processes have practically supplanted the woodcut of both the typographic and calligraphic types. The technical type of woodcut for its perfection requiring that it be designed and cut by the same hand, will never be very widely practiced, but as it is the only one which has possibilities for the further development of the woodcut as an independent art, and offers unlimited scope for discovery and extension, it may be regarded as the only kind which will be much practiced in the future. The Carteret Club and the City of Newark are to be congratulated therefore upon the inclusion in the present exhibition of such

a large number of woodcuts by Rudolph Ruzicka, certainly one of the most important contemporary American original wood-engravers, and one who ranks with the leaders of the modern French school in skill and artistry.

Ruzicka is still a young man. Born in Bohemia in 1888, and brought to this country as a young child, he was apprenticed to a wood-engraver in Chicago in 1897, and got his first training cutting signatures for rubber stamps. While supporting himself by his work in photographic engraving establishments he attended night classes in drawing at the Chicago Art Institute. He began to engrave his own designs in 1907, at which time he was employed as a draughtsman by a commercial advertising house. After his income from this source reached an amount which permitted him to live, he took half-days and full days off from the shop instead of increases in salary, and devoted the time thus won to his chosen art, to which happily he is now enabled to give his entire attention. Once he had begun original engraving he rapidly found himself, and in 1912, barely five years after his start, he was invited to exhibit at the memorable exposition of the *Société de la Gravure sur Bois Originale* held at the

Pavillon de Marsan in the Louvre at Paris, at which six of his prints were exhibited, among them the St. John's Chapel in Varick Street, and the Old State House in Boston, which are here shown. Since that time he has done the illustrations for "New York" privately published in 1915 by the Grolier Club of New York, and Mrs. Charles MacVeagh's "Fountains of Papal Rome" which appeared in the same year, although the woodcuts were made several years later than those for the "New York." He is now engaged in preparing a series of woodcuts in black and white and in color for a book about Newark which the Carteret Club of that city is to publish.

His work would richly repay a more extended study than can be given to it within the limits of this essay, in which little can be done other than to point out some of its salient qualities and to call attention to a few of his more important prints. The first thing which impressed one about his work is its competency, in competent draughtsmanship, cutting and printing, a combination to-day of very great rarity, which, taken in conjunction with his remarkable sanity, creates in one the unusual and comfortable feeling that here is an artist who knows not only his business but his

own mind. And as he does know both these things he exhibits neither outbursts of temperament nor crudities, the occasional *gaucheris* to be noticed in his early work always being more than redeemed by its evident honesty and straightforwardness. As well as any man who has ever made a woodcut he has learned how to bend it to the creation of atmosphere. If one cares to compare an impression of his St. John's Chapel, Varick Street, in black and white, or his color print of the New York Municipal Building, its red ribs towering over the City Hall, with etchings of similar subjects, his accomplishment in this respect can be gauged. I can not recall any one who has made a fuller or more beautiful record of the modern American skyscraper, which though the most important and admirable architectural invention of the last fifty years, has proved so difficult for our painters and etchers. His success in this is based upon an honesty and probity of vision which has forced him to the invention of a new and adequate formula, an achievement to be most seriously considered, as new formulas are rather rare in the history of art. His delightful and refreshing little color print of New York from the Lower Bay, in its charming combination of

blue and green and gray with the mellow white of the paper, is in its quiet way remarkable among the prints which have been made of the great city, for with all its restraint and the quietness of its color, it somehow gives just the needed touch of magic to a view which, in the hands of any but the most accomplished artist, would be banal and uninteresting. Ruzicka's gift of charm, a charm heightened by notable self-respect, is to be seen in all his prints, but is more especially to be seen in small prints of about the same size as the New York from the Lower Bay. Among the best of these are two lovely night scenes in New York, the 1912 Christmas cards of Dr. and Mrs. William S. Dennett and of Ruzicka himself. In his own card we have an intimate and amusing record of one of those gospel tents which make their evanescent and noisy appearance in the vacant lots of the upper city, unknown and unappreciated by the great mass of its inhabitants. The Dennett card, a view of the Public Library seen across Bryant Park, the middle distance filled by the luminous summer crowd attracted by an open air concert, has all the *attrait* which one associates with the gardens of the Tuileries in May. Were it a French print of sixty years ago one

would dare to say that it portrayed all the listless nostalgia of the hot city. The Christmas cards which Ruzicka has made for a well-known Boston printer take a place in his work quite by themselves, as in them he has given supple expression to a local psychology of a kind quite different from that with which he is more familiar. Such woodcuts as the Louisburg Square, Faneuil Hall and Old State House, are correct in every Bostonian sense of the word, a little dry, a little precise, quite restrained and just a little backward looking to the older times of the shallow, straight backed chair which forbade lounging, in a word, charming records of a prime provincial elegance which seems about to depart.

Ruzicka's sensitive suppleness may be most clearly seen if one turns from the Boston color prints or his "New York" to the black and whites which he made of the Roman Fountains for Mrs. MacVeagh's book. He spent the winter and spring of 1913-1914 in Rome making his studies for them, and in several instances cut his blocks there. In these prints, without the aid of color he has by a very beautiful and brilliant handling of his masses of black and white, and a quite extraordinary virtuosity in the use of slender line, captured the

robust exuberant fantasy of the Imperial City. There is nothing archæologizing about these fountains and city squares, nothing sentimental about them, for they are frankly portrayed in their modern setting and incident, and yet as by some magic he has managed to impart to them the sense of the continuity of time and of a people. It seems almost invidious to single out any cuts of the Roman series for special mention, but perhaps one may be forgiven for one's preference for the Fountain of the Sea Horses, the little fountain in the garden of the Villa Borghese and the smaller Piazza del Popolo with the Church of the Santa Maria del Popolo in the background. Surely after seeing these no one should lament the limitations of the woodcut or consider it a dying art.

Prophecy is notoriously a dangerous thing and so to be avoided, but nevertheless one may express a hope that this young artist will continue to grow and develop, past that early middle age which seems to cripple so many American artists. As a designer of topographical woodcuts he has already made noteworthy records of many of the most interesting survivals of past times, and has seized in a masterly way the beautiful aspects of this period of stress and growth.

To his technical competency he has joined a keen sense of the very real poetry of the brick and mortar of New York and Boston in such a way that it seems not impossible the future holds in store for him a position among the makers of great prints limited only by his own will.

W. M. I., Jr.